

Reading "Nanih Waiya (The Choctaw Creation Legend):" This story, narrated and translated by Choctaw Elder Charles G. (Charley) Jones (1918-2004), is a version of the legend told to generations of Choctaw children. *Nanih Waiya*, which in Choctaw means "leaning or stooping hill," is the name of an ancient earthwork mound probably dating from 100 BCE to 300 CE. Since much of it has been leveled by plowing and cultivation, it is impossible to determine the exact size of the original mound, which today is 25 feet tall, 140 feet wide, and 220 feet long. Venerated by the Choctaw people, the sacred mound plays a central role in their origin legends. In his unfinished version, Jones thus describes the mound as the place of "the first creation of man," from which each of the Muskohogean tribes emerged in turn and subsequently settled throughout what is now the southeastern United States. The text is taken from *Legends of the Choctaw* (1992).

de Soto led an expedition through the southeast looking for gold and hoping to open a trade route to China. Taking a chief as a captive, de Soto demanded servants and women from the Choctaw, who attacked his invading army at the town Mabila (Mobile, Alabama). The Spanish troops burned the town but were forced to withdraw, and the Choctaw had no further contact with Europeans until French and English settlers began to move into the area around 1700. Choctaw scouts served on the side of the colonists during the American Revolution, and through a program initiated by General George Washington many Choctaw adopted white customs and culture, intermarrying and converting to Christianity. Along with the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole, the Choctaw were consequently known as one of the "Five Civilized Tribes."

The passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 empowered President Andrew Jackson to force those five tribes to move to "Indian Territory," present-day Oklahoma. The French traveler and writer Alexis de Tocqueville, who witnessed the beginning of the removal of the Choctaw in Memphis, recalled that he had watched "the expulsion, one can say the dissolution, of one of the most celebrated and ancient American peoples." Despite the losses and hardships they endured during the long series of removals, the Choctaw maintained their tribal identity and customs. Cyrus Byington (1793-1868), a Christian missionary from Massachusetts who joined with the Choctaw in Mississippi in 1821 and later established a mission in Oklahoma, spent nearly fifty years developing an orthography, grammar, and dictionary of the Choctaw language, and his authoritative works were instrumental in preserving and perpetuating the language among the Choctaw. Near the end of World War I, several Choctaw servicemen in the American Expeditionary Force became the first of the Native American "code-talkers," securing military communications and consequently playing a pivotal role in an important victory over German forces. Today, the Choctaw Nation is the third largest tribe in North America, with over 200,000 members in southeastern Oklahoma.

bright red, so that his meat was spoiled; and the Cherokee do not eat it. The conjurers put the sun another handbreadth higher in the air, but it was still too hot. They raised it another time, and another, until it was seven handbreadths high and just under the sky arch. Then it was right, and they left it so. This is why the conjurers call the highest place *Gūlkwāgine Dī'gāiūn lātīyūn*, "the seventh height," because it is seven handbreadths above the earth. Every day the sun goes along under this arch, and returns at night on the upper side to the starting place.

There is another world under this, and it is like ours in everything—animals, plants, and people—save that the seasons are different. The streams that come down from the mountains are the trails by which we reach this underworld, and the springs at their heads are the doorways by which we enter it, but to do this one must fast and go to water and have one of the underground people for a guide. We know that the seasons in the underworld are different from ours, because the water in the springs is always warmer in winter and cooler in summer than the outer air.

When the animals and plants were first made—we do not know by whom—they were told to watch and keep awake for seven nights, just as young men now fast and keep awake when they pray to their medicine. They tried to do this, and nearly all were awake through the first night, but the next night several dropped off to sleep, and the third night others were asleep, and then others, until, on the seventh night, of all the animals only the owl, the panther, and one or two more were still awake. To these were given the power to see and to go about in the dark, and to make prey of the birds and animals which must sleep at night. Of the trees only the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the holly, and the laurel were awake to the end, and to them it was given to be always green and to be greatest for medicine, but to the others it was said: "Because you have not endured to the end you shall lose your hair every winter."

Men came after the animals and plants. At first there were only a brother and sister until he struck her with a fish and told her to multiply, and so it was. In seven days a child was born to her, and thereafter every seven days another, and they increased very fast until there was danger that the world could not keep them. Then it was made that a woman should have only one child in a year, and it has been so ever since.

[1900]

Choctaw

The Choctaw are descendants of the Paleo-Indians, who occupied the North American continent as early as 11,000 to 14,000 BCE, and their language is part of the Muskohogean language family, an important linguistic group that also includes Creek, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Apalachee. Farmers who lived in permanent villages, the Choctaw flourished in what is now the southeastern United States, including Mississippi, Alabama, and parts of Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina. Their first contact with Europeans was in 1540 when the Spanish explorer Hernando

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The Chickasaws⁴ third came out of Nanih Waiya. And then they sunned themselves on the earthen rampart, and when they got dry went and followed the Cherokee trail, and when they got to where the Cherokee had settled and made a people, they settled and made a people close to the Cherokee.

The Choctaws fourth and last came out of Nanih Waiya. And they then sunned themselves on the earthen rampart and when they got dry, they did not go anywhere, but settled down in this very land and it is the home of the Choctaw People.

[1994]

4. Chickasaws: Members of a tribe that occupied portions of present-day Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

Potawatomi

The Ojibwa (Chippewa), the Odawa (Ottawa), and the Potawatomi formed what was called the Three Fires Alliance. Members of the closely related tribes spoke dialects of the Algonkian language, and the Potawatomi derived their name from an Ojibwa term, *potawatomiuk*, meaning "people of the place of fire," a reference to their role as the preservers of the council fire for the Alliance. The three tribes migrated together from the north-east to the eastern shore of Lake Huron around 1400, probably because of climate changes that made winters longer and colder in North America. The Potawatomi were driven farther west during what became known as the Beaver Wars of the seventeenth century, a series of bloody conflicts over control of the furtrade fought between the French-backed tribes of the Great Lakes region and the powerful Iroquois Confederacy, supported by the Dutch and English. The Potawatomi first settled in the Door Peninsula of Wisconsin, where they adopted agricultural practices from neighboring tribes, and later moved south along the western shore of Lake Michigan. By the end of the eighteenth century the numerous bands of the decentralized tribe were divided into three geographical groups: the Forest Potawatomi of northern Wisconsin; the Prairie Potawatomi, in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois; and the Potawatomi of the Woods, in southern Michigan and northern Indiana.

Following the American Revolution, the Potawatomi struggled to retain their lands along the shores of Lake Michigan. Potawatomi warriors fought in Tecumseh's War (1811-12), the decisive conflict between the United States and the Indian confederacy led by the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. His death during the War of 1812, when the confederacy was allied with the British, effectively marked the end of Indian resistance throughout the Midwest and Ohio Valley. During the following two decades, the Potawatomi were forced to cede or to abandon their claims to extensive tracts of land, leaving them confined to a series of reservations. Finally, after the

Located in Winston County, Mississippi, this ancient earthenwork mound was part of a state park for most of the twentieth century. But in 2006 the state formally returned control of the site to the Mississippi band of Choctaw Indians.

Nanih Waiya



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(The Choctaw Creation Legend)

A very long time ago, the first creation of man was in Nanih Waiya, and there they were made and there they came forth. The Muskogees¹ first came out of Nanih Waiya, and then they sunned themselves on the earthen rampart, and when they got dry they went to the east. On this (the west) side of the Tombigbee river,² there they rested and as they were smoking tobacco, they dropped some fire.

The Cherokee³ next came out of Nanih Waiya. And they sunned themselves on the earthen rampart, and when they were dry they went and followed the trail of the elder tribe, the Muskogees. And at the place where the Muskogees had stopped and rested, and where they had smoked tobacco, there was fire and the woods were burnt, and the Cherokee could not find the Muskogees' trail, so they got lost and turned aside and went towards the north, and there towards the north they settled and made a people.

1. Muskogees: Members of a powerful tribe that occupied portions of present-day Georgia, Florida, and Alabama and formed the nucleus of the Creek Confederacy.
 2. Tombigbee river: A tributary of the Mobile River that flows from northeastern Mississippi through southwestern Alabama.
 3. Cherokee: Members of a tribe that occupied the hills and valleys of the southern Appalachian Mountains (see pp. 37-38).



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